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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: special economic assistance to individual countries or regions

Special assistance to Central and East African countries receiving refugees, returnees and displaced persons

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. The present report describes the activities of the United Nations and other organizations relating to special assistance to Central and East African countries hosting refugees, returnees and displaced persons, with particular reference to women and children, security, access to populations in need and the environment. It also focuses on the main activities undertaken in areas where large numbers of refugees have repatriated. Activities essentially consisted of providing emergency relief and assistance to thousands of refugees fleeing conflicts in the region. They were undertaken in Burundi, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Congo, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia.

2. In close collaboration, United Nations agencies (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and others) together with international and local NGOs, strove to meet the needs of refugees, returnees and other displaced persons, as well as to lessen the political, economic, and social impact of forced population movements. However, in addition to providing settlement areas, host States assume the responsibility for ensuring security of the affected populations.

3. Emergency preparedness has also been a key concern for all the agencies and joint contingency planning has been taking place regularly.

II. Country activities

A. Burundi

4. The number of internally displaced persons in Burundi remained relatively constant at approximately 550,000 during 1998, but their distribution throughout the country fluctuated as a function of the spread of the fighting between government and rebel forces. In April and May 1999, sporadic security incidents, initially limited to the southern provinces of Bujumbura Rural, Makamba and Bururi, spread to the eastern parts of the country. The conflict resulted in a marked decrease in refugee returns and a substantial increase in departures to the United Republic of Tanzania as well as internal displacement. Almost 15,000 Burundi refugees fled into the United Republic of Tanzania during this period. Between January and June 1999, it is estimated that only 6,000 Burundi refugees repatriated from abroad, mainly from the United Republic of Tanzania, bringing the total number of returnees to over 200,000 since 1996. Given a shortfall in projected funding for its assistance programme in the country, UNHCR was obliged to give priority to protection-related and life-sustaining activities. This led to a sharp reduction in quick impact projects intended to establish basic services, provide individual housing, provide special assistance to unaccompanied minors and develop legal training for women, all with the objective of ensuring adequate reintegration into the country.

5. In Burundi, UNDP launched a community assistance umbrella programme, including an immediate objective to strengthen efforts of rural communities to fully absorb their returned members. This type of assistance contributes to social cohesion and the consolidation of peace in such communities. This programme intends to offer community-based interventions to spur community development through support for shelter, sanitation, health education, safe water supply and institution-building.

6. According to a survey carried out by UNICEF, over half of Burundi's displaced are children under the age of 16 and 56 per cent of displaced persons are women. UNICEF supported therapeutic feeding activities, vaccination campaigns and the efforts of local communities to build and equip temporary schools and repair existing classrooms. Finally, it also trained and equipped hygiene committees in camps occupied by displaced persons, provided water, and helped with the construction of temporary latrines.

B. Democratic Republic of the Congo

7. Since August 1998, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has displaced some 700,000 persons within the country. In addition, some 280,000 refugees are hosted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, having fled Angola, the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and southern Sudan.

8. UNHCR provides the refugees with protection and multifaceted assistance (shelter, health, sanitation, community services, basic education and repatriation support). Camps have been established in Bas Congo for Congolese from the Congo and Angolan refugees. Significant numbers of these Congolese, as well as Rwandans and Burundians, were assisted in repatriating. In addition, following the evacuation of United Nations

agencies from rebel-controlled areas, UNHCR has since re-established a presence at Goma and Aru, allowing relief programmes to resume for Sudanese refugees in Province Oriental.

9. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, with the assistance of other relevant international bodies and organizations, focused on negotiating safe and unhindered access to populations affected by the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Following negotiations with the Government and the rebel authorities, the "Principles of engagement for humanitarian assistance" were endorsed by them. This document sets out the basic operational guarantees for security and access to populations in need for humanitarian agencies.

10. UNICEF established a United Nations humanitarian office at Goma in March 1999. With its support, medical assistance is being delivered to selected medical institutions serving internally displaced persons in the Oriental and Kivu provinces. In collaboration with UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Save the Children Fund UK, UNICEF is continuing to support programmes for the identification, tracing and family reunification of 6,000 unaccompanied minors in North and South Kivu, Oriental Province, the Kasai, Katanga and Bas Congo.

11. As the United Nations agency responsible for providing food to refugees, WFP supplied 10,850 tons of food to Angolan and Congolese refugees at a cost of US$ 8.8 million.

12. Meanwhile, UNDP efforts to assist communities affected by refugees and displaced persons were interrupted by the outbreak of fighting there in 1998. However, as peace returns, such efforts will be resumed.

C. Congo

13. The continuing conflict in the Congo compelled UNHCR to postpone temporarily plans to regroup Rwandan refugees in a single site. Meanwhile, while discussions on this matter are pursued, 7,000 refugees continue to receive multisectoral assistance at two sites. Insecurity has generally prevented access to over 200,000 internally displaced persons located south of Brazzaville.

14. UNDP has been requested to participate in an inter-agency programme that aims to enrol thousands of young ex-combatants in reconstruction works in urban areas to which internally displaced persons are returning.

D. Rwanda

15. The Government of Rwanda requested United Nations agencies and donors to provide life-sustaining assistance to approximately 600,000 internally displaced persons in the North-West. Within the overall United Nations assistance programme, WFP provided regular food aid, UNHCR distributed non-food items, FAO provided agricultural inputs, and UNICEF and WHO supported the activities in the health/sanitation sectors. In addition, international and local NGOs (Concern Worldwide, Food for the Hungry, Rwandan Red Cross, Christina Aid, World Vision, OXFAM and Care International) provided non-food assistance and agricultural inputs.

16. UNHCR rehabilitated and expanded Gihembe refugee camp to improve the living conditions of Congolese refugees sheltered there. A Congolese curriculum is being introduced for primary and secondary education in the two camps. To address the specific situation of women and children, sensitization on child's rights, reproductive health education and gender-based violence sensitization for adolescents in the camps have been integrated into the community services programme funded by UNHCR. UNHCR took up with the civilian and military authorities its concerns regarding reports of sexual violence against refugee women and the abduction of young girls, and advocated improved security in and around the camps. To combat environmental damage, tree planting began on a small scale but was limited to one camp owing to financial constraints.

17. One of the most pressing issues in the region is to address the problem of Rwandans who have not yet returned home after fleeing the country in the aftermath of genocide. Efforts therefore continued to accelerate the voluntary repatriation of Rwandan refugees remaining in the United Republic of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Returnees already make up about 25 per cent of the population in the country.

18. While the phase of humanitarian assistance elicited strong support from donors, it has been followed by more timid inputs by development and bilateral actors. Although the UNHCR shelter programme has contributed to a reduction in the number of returnees living in refugee-like situations thanks to the construction and rehabilitation of 100,000 homes and communal facilities, over 150,000 families still live under plastic sheeting and about 62,000 families live in seriously damaged houses. For peace to be consolidated, additional resources are needed.

19. The social and economic integration of women remain a priority. The UNHCR Rwandan Women's Initiative is

intended to help strengthen the social fabric of Rwandan society and facilitate the process of reconciliation within the country. Within the framework of the Initiative, UNHCR supported adult education facilities providing training in literacy and tailoring, and financed legal assistance and income-generating activities. Committees were set up to follow up on and coordinate Initiative activities.

20. UNDP and UNHCR continued to work through the mechanism of the United Nations Joint Reintegration Programme Unit on a coordinated approach to ensure the sustainability of emergency-oriented activities implemented by UNHCR. UNDP is managing a trust fund of contributions from a number of donors whose principal objective is community-level assistance.

E. United Republic of Tanzania

21. The United Republic of Tanzania experienced a steady influx of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi. By June 1999, the number of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had increased to some 110,000, and by the same date UNHCR, jointly with WFP, UNICEF and other agencies (both local and international), was assisting some 280,000 Burundi refugees. New arrivals have strained reception and transport facilities. Efforts are nevertheless being made to provide refugees with multifaceted assistance in the form of food, shelter, health care, educational/skills development and community services.

22. Local resources have been severely strained by the refugees. In some areas, refugees far outnumber the local population. To alleviate the pressure, UNHCR provides assistance to these areas by strengthening local institutions and infrastructure (rehabilitation of schools, health centres and water facilities). Pressure on the environment has been addressed through, among other activities, reforestation.

23. UNHCR continued to support the Government's efforts to ensure the civilian and humanitarian character of the camps. Two hundred and seventy-eight police officers, including female officers, and one expatriate security liaison officer have been deployed in refugee camps. In addition, subsidies and material support have been provided to the police. A special project was also launched to reduce sexual violence against refugee women and girls. The project aims to provide health care and counselling for victims, as well as to strengthen the ability of the local legal system to bring local perpetrators to trial. Other objectives of the project are to sensitize the refugee population to the seriousness of the problem and support community initiated efforts to address it.

F. Other affected countries

1. Central African Republic

24. The Central African Republic witnessed an influx of some 14,000 refugees from northern towns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The vast majority were women and children who had to walk long distances before reaching safety. Many children have been separated from their parents, and efforts are being made by UNHCR and NGOs to trace their families. New arrivals also included some 6,000 armed elements and their families. The United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA) cooperated with the Government to ensure the peaceful surrender of weapons by armed elements and help restructure the national army with the aim of contributing to a secure environment for the implementation of humanitarian activities. The presence of MINURCA also served as a deterrent to possible military action or confrontation. Finally, MINURCA also assisted the Government in monitoring the electoral process and ensuring that collected weapons are kept safely, pending a settlement of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

25. The influx of Congolese refugees and the presence of Chadian and Sudanese refugees in the country heightened security problems, and raised concerns regarding a possible negative impact on parliamentary and presidential elections. UNHCR launched a major awareness campaign, informing refugees that they should refrain from political activities.

26. UNHCR also endeavoured to lessen the burden on refugee-hosting areas by funding programmes which benefit local communities, providing institutional support to government departments furnishing services to refugees and returnees, and inviting other international organizations to assist these communities.

2. Gabon

27. Gabon witnessed the arrival of over 13,000 refugees from the Congo in the southern provinces of the country, with many moving to major urban centres, such as Libreville and Franceville. Those refugees remaining in the southern provinces, the vast majority of whom are of rural background, were hosted by local communities. To meet the needs of these new arrivals, UNHCR deployed staff from its emergency roster to Libreville, and also assisted the Gabonese authorities in establishing refugee sites. To

respond to the most urgent needs of new arrivals, UNHCR allocated US$ 300,000 from its emergency fund in anticipation of setting up a larger emergency assistance project.

3. Kenya

28. To improve the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees, UNHCR convinced the Kenyan Government to re-establish the national eligibility committee. Efforts also continued to encourage finalization of a draft refugee act to ensure that refugee rights and basic principles of international protection are duly incorporated into national legislation. UNHCR revised its contingency plan for Kenya, to be ready for any eventual large-scale influxes from neighbouring countries. The plans were prepared with the participation of the local authorities, WFP and UNHCR's implementing partners. UNHCR also undertook resource-assessment surveys on fuelwood collection in refugee-hosting areas, and supported environmental education for sound environmental planning as well as for the realization of sustainable energy-management programmes. UNHCR continued activities which focused on awareness-building for refugee women. Gender awareness and equity training was provided for community workers to enable them to assess women's needs and design programmes to address them. In support of efforts by the Kenyan authorities to reduce the crime rate and curb assaults on refugee women, UNHCR assisted the Government in the training of law enforcement officers, the establishment of mobile courts, and the provision of logistical support and communications equipment to the police force deployed to the refugee-hosting areas. UNHCR provided firewood to refugee women to lessen the risks to which they are exposed while collecting firewood, and thereby decreased the incidence of rape. Outreach and counselling services were also provided.

4. Uganda

29. UNHCR continued to assist Rwandan refugees pending their voluntary repatriation. UNHCR designed programmes which targeted the needs of women and children. Refugee women were encouraged to participate in such activities as food distribution, which used to be dominated by male refugees. Refugee women were encouraged to participate in adult literacy and leadership training courses to provide organizational skills. Refugee women were also given priority in income-generating activities and micro-credit programmes. The high drop-out rate of refugee girls in primary schools was recognized, and additional efforts were made to improve their attendance rates. UNHCR also intensified its cooperation with UNFPA in the field of reproductive health. Active cooperation was also pursued with UNICEF for the education of school drop-outs and to address psycho-social needs. The UNHCR contingency plan in Uganda is being integrated with that developed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which covers refugees and internally displaced persons. UNHCR also provided training for the police in Uganda to help the authorities to curb acts of violence and criminality in areas surrounding refugee camps and settlements.

30. The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo triggered an influx of 2,000 Congolese refugees. They receive multisectoral assistance from UNHCR, and have been allotted plots of land and given seeds and tools to encourage self-sufficiency in food production.

5. Zambia

31. In March 1999, refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo began crossing into northern Zambia. Between March and June, more than 25,000 persons had arrived in and around the towns of Kaputa and Sumbu, where they were sheltered temporarily and provided assistance, pending their transfer to a newly established camp at Mporokoso. Transfers to the new site began in April 1999.

III. Conclusion

32. As in prior years, lack of funding remains a great concern. The multiplication of smaller conflicts, with movements of refugees and displaced persons affecting a number of countries, poses particular challenges. Given continuing instability in the region, providing adequate protection and assistance for uprooted populations will continue to be given high priority by the United Nations system.